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(Article begins on next page)

Coda



Wandering Elements and Natures to Come

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Earth and sky, water and fire are the fundamental elements that bind the fate and presence of humans and other Earthlings in their interlocked journey of matter and imagination. Also the stuff of elemental passions, and the light of compositional *jouissance* sparkling into the world's body-mind, these four classical elements are the building blocks of whatever thinks and respires on this living planet. Our blood is saline water, our bones are calcified earth, our breath is volatile air, and our fever is fire—elements that have composed mountains, oceans, and the atmosphere, and have nourished all terrestrial creativities across time and space. Similar to the planet and its motley of residents, the *anthropos*, humans themselves, in diverse cultures and features, are multilayered and “*autochthones* (autochthonous), creatures born of the earth.”¹ And so are plants, animals, and their abode, the earth itself as a cosmic body. “My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air,” sings Walt Whitman, is born here.² “Just as the atmospheric air is multilayered,” writes David Macauley, “so is earth more than monolithic.”³ For the earth is in unremitting formation; as Lowell Duckert notes in his chapter in this volume, “the earth is earthing futures.” The same is true of all the elements. None is defined, even in an ephemeral way, as solitary. All are generative, always becoming, always in flux, going through inevitable stages of metamorphosis.

Unlike the earth encased in compact forms like rocks and clay with mass and weight, the sky is the stretching abode of enduring dreams, desires, mysteries, and gods. It is volatile air, “invisible and nearly intangible” (Cohen). Intangible though it may be, air connects the earth and the sky, bringing forth life, but always eluding the binary of surface and depth (Steel). It is also in every drop of moisture adding impetus to water that sculpts the planet as effectively as other elements. Every wind that blows makes a difference in earth, water, and fire. Each change in air matters in the fabric of existence. It has the gift of movement, heat and cold, and even sound and fury, like the hurricane. “Air is not empty,” writes Morgan Llywelyn in her 1993 novel *The Elementals*. Indeed, the author is right in saying, “Air is alive.” Because, she explains, “Every molecule of air on earth has its part to play in the whole. Myriad life forms dance in what appears, to human eyes, to be empty air.”⁴ In the face of the mystery evoked by the invisibility of the element of air, one can only “gaze into a sky of truths,” as Luce Irigaray writes in *Elemental Passions*;⁵ but this is the atmosphere where truths become “multiveiled” no matter how intensely we peruse the sky, and where “pollutants move or collect” alongside Llywelyn’s dancing life forms.⁶ Swirling and flowing in multifaceted forms, as sky, wind, and breath, air is the primordial abode of life and a shaping presence of aesthetic and environmental imagination.

Water figures prominently, too, in environmental imagination. From Gaston Bachelard’s phenomenological insight water arises as “the most receptive of the elements.”⁷ It signifies reflections and images, and—embodied in rivers, lakes, and seas—it undeniably evokes “reverie.” It is important to note that the “imagination” underlying this *reverie* in Bachelard as well as in other more ancient thinkers has a solid, material constitution. The solid mind of the earth thinks, and its dreams generate all beings natural. In the material fabric of emerging forms, water is the foremost component, the “essential, ontological metamorphosis,” as Bachelard avers, “between fire and earth.”⁸ It is, he insists, “the maternal voice”;⁹ and just like the maternal, water is—literally, etymologically—matter itself. Water is primal milk, “the first substantive in the order of liquid realities,” simply because “a material image of milk underlies the more conscious image of the waters.”¹⁰ Echoing these ideas (or maybe simply *reimagining* them), the British postmodern author John Fowles refers to the sea as “our evolutionary amniotic fluid,

the element in which we too were once enwombed, from which our own antediluvian line rose into the light and air.”¹¹ Water and dreams, therefore, are elementally woven together. But Bachelard also makes a poignant point not to be missed in reveries: “The story of water is the human tale of a dying water.”¹² Thus, although it evokes “a dream of limpidity” and “is the conqueror of fire,”¹³ water is conquered by the human, made impure, nocturnal, and yes, utterly polluted, falling back as acidic rain in the domestication process (i.e., “engineering projects”).¹⁴ Once *aqua vitae*, water of life, but now almost turned *aqua mortis*, as Nâzım Hikmet, Turkey’s revolutionary poet, put it in “The Dream”: “Rain falls softly, / fearful / like secret whispers / of betrayal.”¹⁵ Water turns bad, though more metaphorically so when hyper-commodified as pure purity, and really bad, if not becoming absent, when engineered, diverted, dammed, and colonized. It simply becomes, as Julian Yates writes in his chapter, “a network of deterritorialized particles of life effects in the form of microbes and genetic fragments.”

Domesticated like water, and signifying divine betrayal, fire has been central to human civilization. It brings the comforts of electricity, heat, and light but also death and destruction when used in weaponry. It is the element that transformed humanity when Prometheus stole it from the gods and offered it as a precious gift. Therefore, David Macauley claims, fire “opens up not only previously unthinkable possibilities but also a Pandora’s box of problems.”¹⁶ Fire is creative passion. It is fiery and invigorating. Its culpability is more on the foreground than other elements. In *The Elementals*, Llywelyn calls it “inflaming, energizing, consuming,” pointing to its “vigor, ardor, intensity, fervor, passion, fury, magic, inspiration, genius, brilliance.”¹⁷ Fire is the divine element that forged “post-Edenic” imagination. Elemental ecocriticism, as Anne Harris aptly puts it in her chapter, can claim it “as a living thing,” a thing of hypnotic agency and unpredictability. With its pyrotechnic energy, “fire moves through metamorphosis” in the labyrinth of elements.

These fundamental elements are the primary inspiration behind the conception of the nine chapters in *Elemental Ecocriticism*. As they indicate, the book transcends, however, the primary elemental ground, subsuming them, adding “imaginary substance(s)” like “phlogiston” — “the fire-air combination” (Mentz), and reminding us of “the complexities of life beyond the organic” (Cohen). When elements “promiscuously combine,” Jeffrey Jerome

Cohen writes, a “unique ecology” emerges, and in that process of composition new things “disclose surprising worlds, challenging narratives, the tangling of nature’s chain.” Even the fifth element, ether, here examined by Chris Barrett, is part of this entanglement. Is ether the essential component of cosmos as Aristotle has claimed? In Barrett’s lyrical prose, the answer is yes; “the ethereal cosmos” is suffused, she contends, “by an elemental laughter.” Ether is “elusively natured,” writes Barrett. Its “essential nature is circular, simultaneously constituting the outer cosmos while mirroring itself in human bodies hovering between an Empedoclean love and agony.” Ether, then, is about self-reflection, transformation, and an invitation to think the world anew. In other words, constituting baryonic matter (“everything we see, and everything that has form, plus all known energies”¹⁸), the elements comprise a tableau on which material imagination paints myriad literary images, sensual values, and ontological vicissitudes: fickleness, uncertainty, unpredictability, vacillation, evolution, and novelty. “Becoming other” is what happens in the cauldron of mixtures in element ecologies. Just like the sea becomes “the domain of what cannot be contained by wisdom and reason,” as John Fowles says in his essay “Islands,”¹⁹ elemental ecology is not only wisdom but is also affective involvement in fascinating labyrinths. One can call it “the site of intersection,” quoting David Macauley, of counterbalancing elements and human visions, literary, scientific, philosophical, and technological.²⁰ It fosters “affective ecology” in confronting “an existential crisis that is literally ecological” (Barrett).

Thinking along this crisis, in fact, encourages “muddy thinking,” as Sharon O’Dair exemplifies in her chapter. She claims that “literary criticism periodically seems to require the slinging of mud in the name of purity.” And thus, ecocriticism turns elemental, but not in a perverse mood to celebrate the impure, though it certainly makes us think deeply about what it means to be impure. Rather, to curiously investigate “how matter’s life swarms from the earth” (Steel), creating what Steve Mentz calls in his chapter “phlogisticated thinking.” Underlining it as both “material and metaphor,” Mentz proposes the imaginary element, “phlogiston,” as a way to “advance the efforts of literary ecocriticism to reanimate stories about physical elements, to make them glow with renewed meaning.” Another compelling image of ecocritical analysis is offered by Valerie Allen. Referring

to doubting Thomas in her chapter on air, Allen philosophizes about his “doublemindedness.” We can certainly imagine the doubling of human mind on crisis-laden ecosystems, or even existence in toto, “on this uncontrolledly sprouting planet . . . and its destiny,” as Fowles puts it, that “waver and zigzag amid a triangle of opposing yet counterbalancing factors.”²¹ But even more significantly, this doubling is a way to “de-provincialize” the human both in its mind and materiality, to make it aware of the elemental porosity that determines its very being. The elements that constitute our being need therefore to be mutually permeable, as a form of “material sociability.” Hence “wetness,” as Julian Yates notes in his chapter, is both a condition and a medium for this “desire for a different order of burrowing, for a more capacious mode of hospitality”—something that makes us at once vulnerable and elementally open, enriching our elemental story with new, unrelenting becomings.

Putting together imagined and real elements, their stories and *logoi* as they appear in medieval and early modern authors and environments, *Elemental Ecocriticism* aims to reanimate elemental thinking, encouraging us to “think about *thinking* with” (Duckert) the elements. It aims not simply to explore how they have affected our stories but also to show that they *are* all the stories of the cosmic adventure—including our story, the story of how the two of us, like all the authors in this volume, came to “think about” these topics by way of “thinking with”: with each other, with the elements, with the force of things. Acknowledging this fact implies radially extending the connective tissue of our relations as well as our relationships, of our materiality as well as our creativity. In “The Sea Above,” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen expresses this objective eloquently:

To acknowledge how the elements work, matter, and thrive, to realize our utter embroilment within a world of plants, animals, winds, seas, sky, stone, is to realize that environmental activism mandates ecological agentism. Not the anthropomorphic granting of rights, not the promulgation of dangerous myths of sustainability.

Elemental ecocriticism plunges us in the *ratio* of things, which is at the same time the mixture, the proportion, and the reason/mind of what is

around and inside us, before and after us. An ecocritical gaze into this process of worldly “embroilments” is at once the claim that this process produces forms, and that the human subject deals with these forms physically and cognitively. In that it recognizes the agency of the elemental, such an ecocriticism wants to be involved in this telluric adventure of forces as a cognitive principle, even if this cognition culminates in a displacement of the human from its self-elevated maps of privileged lifeworlds. Containing such lifeworlds and their ruminations, elemental ecocriticism, like James Turrell’s art as discussed in Timothy Morton’s response essay in this volume, is a “double invagination” with “its givenness allowed to permeate everywhere,” a “thinking together” of the elemental and the ecological with “distributed affects.” To put it otherwise, elemental ecocriticism rides on the waves of elemental complexities that unfold from the threshold of their ecological, philosophical, and literary labyrinths. The elemental nature of things, their dynamism and complexity, and “all the myriad changes taking place” in a system’s environment (Cary Wolfe, this volume) invite a strange practice of “thinking with elements,” as Stacy Alaimo calls it in her own response essay, echoing Morton. This is at the core of elemental ecocriticism, even though, as Alaimo contends, elements “are rarely matters of concern,” because they “do not ignite environmental ethics or politics.” But, as the chapters in this volume attest to it, elemental ecocriticism has turned the elements into matters of concern, not only in terms of their ecological significance but also in terms of their profound effects on material imagination. The following step will be, as we can predict with confidence, that the elements will also figure in environmental ethics or politics in the near future.

Elemental ecocriticism wants to show that the elements *matter* and follow the forms *qua* stories that their mattering assumes. The narratives emerging from this process of mattering are stories of returns and encounters, and in fact they are the same that an ancient poet and philosopher, the Sicilian Empedocles of Acragas, *acknowledged* in the unremitting combinations of earth, water, air, and fire—all tied, mixed, and finally untied by the caprices of love and strife. In these stories, the “ego,” the human self, is an accident of substance, an occasional emergence on a plot in which matters and forms slip into one another: “For there was a time when I was

boy and girl, thicket and bird, and a scaly fish in the waves,” the philosopher said.²²

Creating ties with beings and voices from the past embedded within the past and present spaces, *Elemental Ecocriticism* wants to add new layers to these stories, reaffirming and perfecting the “disanthropocentric” shift of *Prismatic Ecology*. Here, like in that previous important volume, the “impure” is the cipher of life, knowledge, and love. Muddy, impure, and familial, the elemental gaze of the authors in this book recommends at once irony and hope. For they know that the human is an elemental episode, but they also know, as Lowell Duckert writes, “the ways we narrate stories, and the stories themselves, can shape the earth(s) to come.” In its being a disanthropocentric project of ongoing combinations, elemental ecocriticism wants to show that, in the earth(s) to come, our stories and the stories of the elements will be materially eloquent in their entwinements. They will enact nourishing and substantive resonances within the bodymind of the planet. As the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, creatively echoing Empedocles’s ideas and story, wrote in 1798–99:

Let others speak on my behalf when I am far away,
The flowers of the sky, the blossoms of the stars,
And all those stars on earth, the myriad germinations;
Divinely present nature
Needs no speech; no, never she will leave you to
Your own devices, if but once she has drawn near.
For inextinguishable is the moment that is hers.²³

If nature exists, elements are its (or her, or his, or their) words. Elemental ecocriticism wants to assemble these words into stories: not only stories to tell but also stories to come.

Notes

1. David Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010), 25.
2. Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, 2nd. ed., ed. Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair (New York: W. W Norton, 1988), 22.
3. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 15.

4. Morgan Llywelyn, *The Elementals* (New York: TOR, 1993), 281.
5. Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, trans. Joanne Collie and Judith Smith (New York: Routledge, 1992), 37.
6. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 27.
7. Joanne H. Stroud, "Foreword," in *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* by Gaston Bachelard, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 2006), ix.
8. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 6.
9. Ibid., 116.
10. Ibid., 117.
11. John Fowles, "Islands," in *Wormholes: Essays and Occasional Writings* (New York: Henry Hall and Co., 1998), 282.
12. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 47.
13. Ibid., 53, 105.
14. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 4.
15. Nâzım Hikmet, "The Dream," in *Beyond the Walls: Selected Poems*, trans. Ruth Christie, Richard McKane, and Talat Sait Halman (London: Anvil Press Poetry; Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2002), 72.
16. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 36.
17. Llywelyn, *The Elementals*, 87.
18. Robert Lanza and Bob Berman, *Biocentrism: How Life and Consciousness Are the Keys to Understanding the True Nature of the Universe* (Dallas, Tex.: BenBella Books, 2009), Kindle edition, 6.
19. Fowles, "Islands," 297.
20. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 118.
21. Fowles, "The Nature of Nature," in *Wormholes*, 347.
22. Empedocles, Fr. 117: ἤδη γάρ ποτ' ἐγὼ γενόμην κοῦρός τε κόρη τε θάμνος τ' οἰωνός τε καὶ ἔξαλος ἔλλοπος ἰχθύς. Trans. Serenella Iovino.
23. Friedrich Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles: A Mourning-Play*, trans. with introduction, notes, and analysis by David Farrell Krell (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 93.